MONTESSORI

JAMES L. HYMES, JR.
Professor of Education
University of Maryland, College Park

MARIA Montessori began her work with young children, primarily retarded youngsters and those from economically underprivileged backgrounds, in Italy in the early 1900s. In Europe this was a new venture and one which received much publicity.

By the 1900s in America, however, there already was a strong movement concerned with the education of young children. Private kindergartens had been established as early as 1855. The first public kindergartens began in 1873. Many vigorous and creative early childhood specialists—among them Elizabeth Peabody, Susan Blow, Anna Bryan, Patty Smith Hill, Alice Temple—had given leadership to the movement.

Nationally known educators such as John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, Colonel Francis Parker were very aware of the importance of early education. The new Child Study Movement, spurred by G. Stanley Hall, emphasized the early years. Two large professional organizations—the International Kindergarten Union and the Kindergarten-Primary Department of the NEA—were centers for discussion about young children.

Publicity Revival

When Montessori publicity reached America, a group of educators here eagerly went to Italy to see the new program in action. They arrived full of hope for seeing a new and better education of the young child in practice. Their dominant feeling, after observation and after discussion with Madame Montessori and other leaders of that movement, was one of great let-down. The American report, published in 1914, was to the effect that the Montessori materials were not as sound as the teaching materials in use at that time in American schools. The report noted certain general similarities between the Montessori system and American theory and practice, but felt that American education of the young was more advanced than the "new" Montessori methods.

Some Montessori schools did develop in America but the movement never gained wide support here. These few schools gradually died as American kindergartens and, later, nursery schools developed and flourished here. The American development has never been associated with any one name or one "system." Many individuals from many fields of learning—psychiatry, psychology, child development, sociology, education—contributed to the development.

In contrast, Montessori schools in Europe expanded in number from the small beginning in Italy and stayed associated with the name—these were Montessori schools. There are several possible explanations for this difference in development. Probably the most likely is the timing of the appearance of Montessori on the scene in relation to what was going on in America. Educators here in the 1900s were deeply involved in improving the old Froebelian approaches in the light of the new knowledge emerging from psychiatry and from the beginning studies of child growth and development. Montessori had little to contribute here so, in a sense, America leapfrogged the Montessori movement. Had it come thirty years earlier it might have had an impact at that time on American education.

It is also true that in Europe there were fewer leaders, less research, fewer colleges and universities concerned with young children, so Montessori had less competition in Europe in the marketplace of ideas. There was, too, a difference between Europe and America in the goals of education. Whatever the historical explanation, the present-day outcome has been almost identical for, in recent years, even in Europe purely Montessori schools have become fewer and fewer in number.

In light of this background, the recent rebirth of Montessori has come as a great surprise to professional educators. For all practical purposes Maria Montessori had become simply one in a series of historical personalities who, at a time in the past, had made a contribution to early childhood education. The impression one has is that the new interest has been stimulated by astute magazine publicity, rather than by any new discovery or research or professional insight.

This recent rash of publicity has fallen on fertile ground among some for several reasons. Some of the Montessori materials are designed for formal academic instruction and, in particular, for formal early reading. Most of the materials are designed to be used in one set, "right" way which presumably leads to good study and work habits. Montessori schools tend to be quieter than other schools, and more orderly. These elements make good news stories and are welcomed by some.

In Perspective

It is hard to contrast a total Montessori program with that of other schools because schools do differ, no matter what their banner. The following generalizations probably would tend to hold true:

1. Montessori schools tend to minimize the whole field of children's literature; other schools tend to regard good children's stories and poems as a significant part of a child's cultural heritage, as important education experiences, and as making a significant contribution to later reading.

2. Montessori schools tend to minimize field trips and excursions; other schools tend to give high priority to such firsthand observation and regard these experiences as the young child's best way of beginning on academic learnings.

3. Montessori schools tend to minimize the significance of dramatic play; other schools tend to regard play as a highly significant stage in the young child's development and they tend to consider imagination and creativity as very important educational goals.

4. Montessori schools tend to emphasize work experiences for young children but define these as specific tasks—such as shining shoes, polishing vases, etc.—to be done in a prescribed way; other schools also encourage children to work on jobs but seek those activities which are meaningful and functional in children's lives.

5. Montessori schools tend to rely heavily on specific Montessori materials; other schools tend to use a wider variety of materials and especially those which encourage children to experiment and to solve problems in their own way (although some Montessori-type materials have long been commercially available in this country and included in the rich variety available to children in all schools).

6. Montessori schools tend to minimize outdoor activity—there is no specific Montessori equipment for this part of a program; other schools are concerned with children's physical development and with the social and intellectual learnings that come through outdoor play.

7. Montessori schools tend to be quieter and with children working more as individuals; other schools tend to foster greater freedom for children, greater movement, greater social intercourse among children.

8. Montessori teachers tend to be trained as technicians in the use of Montessori materials; other schools are apt to be very concerned about the psychological insights of their staff and about the cultural and liberal arts background of the teachers.

9. Montessori teachers, in practice, tend to be more controlling; other schools are apt to seek teachers who are active in planning but who do not impose learnings on children but who, instead, seek ways of leading children to their own discoveries.

One book describing the present-day American approach to Montessori is *Learning How To Learn,* by Nancy McCormick Rambusch (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1962). The American report, referred to earlier and now out of print, is *The Montessori System Examined,* by William H. Kilpatrick (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1914).

One among many books that might be named on the present-day approach to early childhood is *Good Schools for Young Children,* by Sarah Lou Hammond and others (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

Copyright © 1965 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.